
Government of the District of Columbia



**Office of the Deputy Mayor for
Public Safety and Justice**

Testimony of
Melissa Hook
Director of the Office of Victim Services

***Public Roundtable on
“Funding of Domestic Violence Services
in the District of Columbia”***

Committee on the Judiciary
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia
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Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
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Good morning Chairperson Mendelson and members of the Committee. I am Melissa Hook, Director of Victim Services in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice. I appreciate this opportunity today to speak to you about current and projected funding activities through the Office of Victim Services of agencies and organizations that serve victims of domestic violence in the District of Columbia. I applaud the Council's leadership on this issue, especially that of Councilmember Brown, who has been so effective in bringing attention to the dire need for emergency shelter in the District. I feel fortunate to be in the company of my esteemed colleagues, the victim advocates presenting testimony to you this morning. I can not stress the importance of their dedication and hard work providing shelter, counseling and legal advocacy to victims in our community. It is the intention of the Office of Victim Services to provide them with every support possible within the limits of our funding capabilities to expand their efforts to serve our population of domestic violence victims.

One of the primary duties of the Office for Victims Services is to apply for and manage federal formula grants from the Office for Victims of Crime (VOCA) and the Office for Violence Against Women (VAWA). These funds are awarded by the Department of Justice to each state and territory, in amounts based on population, and they form the basis of federal funding for crime victim services throughout the nation. The Office for Victim Services is currently funding twelve sub-grantees with our VOCA award, five of which are agencies and organizations that provide services to victims of domestic violence. We are currently funding nine sub-grantees with our VAWA award, eight of which are agencies and organizations that provide services to victims of domestic violence. I should point out that both federal awards come with a set of criteria that determine how these funds can be distributed. Generally speaking, VOCA and VAWA awards fund a portion of the salaries of providers and operating costs for the District organizations. The District has been awarded a combined total of \$1,951,364 of VOCA and VAWA funds for fiscal year 2007.

The District of Columbia is extremely fortunate to have a third funding stream to support services for victims of crime called the Victim Assistance Fund. Before I tell you in detail how the Office for Victim Services oversees distribution of monies from the Fund, I want to provide you with some background on the Fund's creation.

Across the nation, Crime Victim Compensation Funds directly reimburse victims of crime for certain expenses incurred as a result of violent victimization. In most states, Compensation Funds are made up of fines and fees paid by offenders and a formula grant awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime. In 1996, the District of Columbia Crime Victims Compensation Fund (Fund), which is managed by a federal agency within the DC Superior Court, lacked the resources to reimburse all violent crime victims entitled to compensation. As a result, Congress passed legislation for the District of Columbia in 1997 that added court filing fees to criminal fines to increase deposits in the Fund. These filing fees, which average six to seven million dollars a year, were more than the Fund was able to distribute for lack of contact with crime victims and referrals from service

providers. Unobligated funds accumulated quickly and following a period of negotiation, Congress passed legislation in 2001 that allowed for fifty percent of the unspent and unobligated funds to be transferred to the District to develop victim services. The District Government created the Victim Assistance Fund, which is housed in the Office of Victim Services, to manage the distribution of the unobligated funds through awards to sub-grantees in the District. To my knowledge, we are the only state or territory in the nation with this unique funding stream.

Included in my written testimony distributed to you today is a chart that shows the movement of deposits into the Victim Assistance Fund from the DC Superior Court and movement out through awards to sub-grantees. You will see that large deposits were made into the fund in 2002 and 2004 totaling over \$24 million dollars. In 2005 and 2006, the deposits in the Victim Assistance Fund from the Court averaged \$3.1 million a year. We have estimated a small reduction in transfer of funds from the Court in 2007 and 2008 in our future allocations for programs.

Two unknowns make it impossible to determine the amount of unobligated funds that will be transferred annually to the District in the future: amounts of filing fees and criminal fines deposited into the Compensation Fund and amounts of direct reimbursements paid out by the Compensation Office. In other words, if filing fees decrease and/or if our service providers (whom the Victim Assistance Fund supports) reach out to more victims and help them successfully receive compensation, the amount transferred to the Victim Assistance Fund will decrease proportionally.

In the next section of my testimony, I will map out current and projected funding allocations from the Victim Assistance Fund for services to domestic violence victims.

Increased Services

Since 2003, the Office of Victim Services has made awards from the Victim Assistance Fund for “increased services” in all areas of violent victimization in the District. These awards fund primarily a portion of the salaries of providers and operating costs for the organizations. In fiscal year 2006, the Office for Victim Services awarded over \$1,900,000 for Increased Services to domestic violence victims. Depending on the availability of funds transferred from the DC Superior Courts, we will continue this funding at the same level in 2007 and 2008.

Model Projects

In 2004 and 2005, the Office of Victim Services, in collaboration with District victim service providers, developed a plan to create critical organizational and physical infrastructures in the District to meet the needs of crime victims. Awards to service providers beginning in fiscal year 2006 from the Victim Assistance Fund will help them achieve these outcomes.

To develop organizational infrastructure, providers that serve homicide victims, sexual assault victims, child victims, and domestic violence victims are establishing much-

needed coalitions who will work collaboratively to develop policy, conduct public outreach, and educate our community, our policymakers and our criminal and juvenile justice partners about the specific needs and concerns of the victim populations that they represent. In the area of domestic violence, the Office of Victim Services has awarded \$550,000 in fiscal year 2006 for a domestic violence outreach project and a model project to establish a membership coalition of domestic violence providers. We intend to award continuation funding in the same amounts for fiscal year 2007 and 2008.

Creating a physical infrastructure that meets the diverse needs of crime victims is a far greater challenge as it involves the purchase and construction or renovation of property. The Office of Victim Services has made the development of emergency shelters and an independent victim service center in an underserved neighborhood a priority. Over the next four years, the Office of Victim Services has obligated \$9,600,000 from the Victim Assistance Fund to build and operate these facilities. The “needs” list for physical infrastructure, however, is far greater than what the Victim Assistance Fund will be able to support over the long term and includes a homicide support center and needless to say, hundreds of units of transitional housing for victims of domestic violence.

The Office of Victim Services has dedicated \$3,500,000 for the construction of emergency shelter beds for domestic violence victims. In fiscal year 2006, we have awarded \$2,159,414 for the construction of approximately sixty-four emergency beds. Of the remaining amount, we have allocated dollars for cost overruns in the construction projects, and what is not spent on construction will be reserved for operating costs of the emergency shelters once they are completed. An additional \$1,000,000 has been set aside for operating expenses for emergency shelters from the Fund. The Office of Victim Services will guarantee operating costs for sixty-four emergency beds that the Fund is financing for a minimum of three years following completion of the structures. It is important to point out that the Mayor has included \$1 million in the local funds baseline in the proposed fiscal year 2007 budget that is targeted for assistance to victims of domestic violence.

The Office of Victim Services will make every effort to work collaboratively with the Council and the Administration. We honor the individuals and organizations that serve victims of domestic violence. We will make every effort to manage the Victim Assistance Fund fairly and effectively. To whatever extent that we can improve communication and response to the Council, our community of providers and our community of crime victims, we stand ready to comply. I cannot express more emphatically, however, that meeting the needs of domestic violence victims in the District of Columbia, over the long term, will require additional funding. I pledge to work closely with the Mayor, the Council and the victim service providers to identify other funding sources that can support programs for victims of domestic violence, and I welcome the input of other agencies in the District government that can help us meet this great challenge.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. I am available for any questions that you may have.